JACOBITE

THE ATOMIZATION TRAP

Nick Land - June 6, 2017 -

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"Hands up everyone who hates atomization." That isn't a call for surrender (at least overtly), but merely an informal poll.

Now try it differently:

"Hands up everyone who hates atomization, but this time *without looking around*." Was the decision-process – perhaps ironically – a little slower this time? It's worth thinking about that. Taking a shortcut that bypasses the social process might be expected to speed things up. Yet on the other hand – introducing the delay – comes the hazy recognition: If you make the call privately, you're already complicit. A minor formal re-organization of the question transforms it insidiously. *What do you think of atomization, speaking atomistically?* It becomes a strange, or self-referential loop. Modern history has been like that.

First, though, a few terminological preliminaries. An 'atom' is etymologically indistinct from an 'individual.' At the root, the words are almost perfectly interchangeable. Neither, relative to the other, carries any special semantic charge. So if 'atomization' sounds like a metaphor, it really isn't. There's nothing essentially derivative about the word's sociological application. If it appears to be a borrowing from physics, that might be due to any number of confusions, but not to a displacement from an original or natural terrain. Atoms and societies belong together primordially, though in tension. That's what being a social animal – rather than a fully 'eusocial' one (like an ant, or a mole-rat) – already indicates.

Individuals are hard to find. Nowhere are they simply and reliably *given*, least of all to themselves. They require historical work, and ultimately fabrication, even to float them as functional approximations. A process is involved. That's why the word 'atomization' is less prone to dupery than 'atom' itself is. Individuality is nothing outside a destiny (but this is to get ahead of ourselves).

It's difficult to know where to begin. (Did Athens sentence Socrates to death for being a social atomizer?) Individualism is stereotypically WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic), and so tends to lead into the labyrinth of comparative ethnography. It has been unevenly distributed, in roughly the same way that modernity has been. Since this is already to say almost everything on the topic, it merits some dismantling.

The work of Walter Russell Mead provides a useful relay station. The historical questions he has engaged – which concern nothing less than *the outcome of the world* – have been embedded within an intellectual framework shaped by special attention to modern providential Christianity. What has been the source of the 'manifest destiny' which has placed the keys to global mastery in the hands of a progressively distilled social project, Protestant, then Puritan, then Yankee? If not exactly or straightforwardly 'God' (he is too subtle for that), it is at least something that the lineage of Reform Christianity has tapped with unique effectiveness. Protestantism sealed a pact with historical destiny – to all appearances defining a specifically modern global teleology – by consistently winning. Individualization of conscience –

atomization – was made fate.

Six years after *Special Providence* (2001) came *God and Gold*, which reinforced the Anglo-American and capitalistic threads of the narrative. The boundaries between socio-economic and religious history were strategically melted, in a way pioneered by Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and – more critically – by numerous Catholic thinkers who have identified, and continue to identify, the essence of modernity as a hostile religious power. Eugene Michael Jones is Walter Russell Mead on the other side of the mirror. The story each is telling transforms without significant distortion into that of the other, once chilled below the threshold of moral agitation. Whatever it was that happened to Western Christianity in the Renaissance unleashed capitalism upon the world.

It is possible to be still cruder without sacrificing much reality. When considered as rigid designations, Atomization, Protestantism, Capitalism, and Modernity name exactly the same thing. In the domain of public policy (and beyond it), *privatization* addresses the same directory.

While any particular variant of implicit or explicit Protestantism has its distinctive theological (or atheological) features, just as any stage of capitalistic industrialization has its concrete characteristics, these serve as distractions more than as hand-holds in the big picture. The only truly big picture is *splitting*. The Reformation was not only a break, but still more importantly a normalization of breaking, an initially informal, but increasingly rigorized, protocol for social disintegration. The ultimate solution it offered in regard to all social questions was not argumentation, but exit. Chronic fission was installed as the core of historical process. Fundamentally, that is what atomization means.

Protestantism – *Real Abstract Protestantism* – which is ever more likely to identify itself as post-Christian, post-theistic, and post-Everything Else, is a self-propelling machine for incomprehensibly prolonged social disintegration, *and everyone knows it*. Atomization has become an autonomous, inhuman agency, or at least, something ever more autonomous, and ever more inhuman. It can only liquidate everything you've ever cared about, by its very nature, so – of course – no one likes it. Catholicism, socialism, and nationalism have sought, in succession, coalition, or mutual competition, to rally the shards of violated community against it. The long string of defeat that ensued has been a rich source of cultural and political mythology. Because there is really no choice but to resist, battle has always been rejoined, but without any serious sign of any reversal of fortune.

Under current conditions, atomization serves – uniquely – as an inexhaustible tube of reactionary glue. Profound aversion to the process is the sole common denominator of our contemporary cultural opposition, stretching from traditionalist Catholicism to alt-right ethno-nationalism. "Whatever our preferred glue, can't we at least agree that things have become

unglued – and are ever less glued?" That seems very far from an unreasonable aspiration. After all, if coalition building is the goal, what – imaginably – could provide a better rallying point than the very principle of social integrity, even if this is invoked purely, and negatively, by way of an anathematization directed at its fatal historic foe? Atomization, in this regard, brings people together, at least conversationally, though this works best when the conversation doesn't get very deep.

Scarcely anybody wants to be atomized (they say). Perhaps they read Michel Houellebecq's 1998 novel *Atomised* (or *Elementary Particles*), and nod along to it. How could one not? If that's where it ended, it would be hard to see the problem, or how there ever came to be a problem, but it doesn't end there, or anywhere close, because atomization makes a mockery of words. Atomization was never good at parties, unsurprisingly. It's unpopular to the point of essence. There's the Puritan thing, and the Ayn Rand thing, and the nerd thing, and the trigger for Asperger's jokes – if that's actually a separate thing – and no doubt innumerable further social disabilities, each alone disqualifying, if receiving a 'like' in some collective medium is the goal, because nobody likes it, as we've heard (for half a millennium already). But what we've heard, and what we've seen, have been two very different things.

Atomization never tried to sell itself. Instead, it came free, with everything else that was sold. It was the formal implication of dissent, first of all, of methodical skepticism, or critical inquiry, which presupposed a bracketing of authority that proved irreversible, and then – equally implicit originally – the frame of the contractual relation, and every subsequent innovation in the realm of the private deal (there would be many, and we have scarcely started). "So what do *you* think (or want)?" That was quite enough. No articulate enthusiasm for atomization was ever necessary. The sorcery of revealed preference has done all the work, and there, too, we have scarcely started.

Atomization may have few friends, but it has no shortage of formidable allies. Even when people are readily persuaded that atomization is undesirable, they ultimately want to decide for themselves, and the more so as they think that it matters. Insofar as atomization has become a *true horror*, it compels an intimate cognitive and moral relation with itself. No one who glimpses what it is can delegate relevant conclusions to any higher authority. Thus it wins. Every Catholic of intellectual seriousness has seen this, for centuries. Socialists have too, for decades. The moment of ethno-nationalist revelation cannot long be delayed. Under modern conditions, every authoritative moral community is held hostage to private decision, even when it is apparently affirmed, and especially when such affirmation is most vehemently asserted. (The most excitable elements within the world of Islam see this arriving, and are conspicuously unhappy about the fact.)

Substantially, if only notionally, freedom of conscience might tend to collectivity, but formally it locks-in individualism ever more tightly. It defies the authority of community at the very

moment it offers explicit endorsement, by making community an urgent matter of private decision, and – at the very peak of its purported sacredness – of *shopping*. Religious traditionalists see themselves mirrored in whole-food markets, and are appalled, when not darkly amused. "Birkenstock Conservatives" was Rod Dreher's grimly ironic self-identification. Anti-consumerism becomes a consumer preference, the public cause a private enthusiasm. Intensification of collectivist sentiment only tightens the monkey-trap. It gets worse.

American history – at the global frontier of atomization – is thickly speckled with *elective communities*. From the Puritan religious communities of the early colonial period, through to the 'hippy' communes of the previous century, and beyond, experiments in communal living under the auspices of radicalized private conscience have sought to ameliorate atomization in the way most consistent with its historical destiny. Such experiments reliably fail, which helps to crank the process forward, but that is not the main thing. What matters most about all of these co-ops, communes, and cults is the semi-formal contractual *option* that frames them. From the moment of their initiation – or even their conception – they confirm a sovereign atomization, and its reconstruction of the social world on the model of a menu. Dreher's much-discussed 'Benedict Option' is no exception to this. There is no withdrawal from the course of modernity, 'back' into community, that does not reinforce the pattern of dissent, schism, and exit from which atomization continually replenishes its momentum. As private conscience directs itself towards escape from the privatization of conscience, it regenerates that which it flees, ever more deeply within itself. Individuation, considered impersonally, likes it when you run.

As is well understood, 'atoms' are not atoms, and 'elements' are not elements. Elementary particles – if they exist at all – are at least two (deep) levels further down. Human individuals are certainly no less decomposable. Marvin Minsky's 'society of mind' is but one vivid indication of how historical sociology might tilt into the sub-atomic realm. Particle accelerators demonstrate that shattering entities down to the smallest attainable pieces is a technological problem. The same holds in the social realm, though naturally with very different technologies.

To dismiss individuals as metaphysical figments, therefore, would be the most futile of diversions. Atomization has no constraining metaphysics, whether in particle physics or in the dynamic anthropological, socio-historical process. If it promises at times to tell you what you really are, such whispers will eventually cease, or come to deride themselves, or simply be forgotten. Protestantism, it has to be remembered, is only masked, momentarily, as a religion. What it is underneath, and enduringly, is a way of breaking things.

After so much has already been torn apart, with so many monstrosities spawned, it is no doubt exhausting to be told that while almost everything remains to be built, no less still waits to be

broken. Atomization has already gone too far, we are incessantly told. If so, the future will be hard. There can be no realistic doubt that it will be extremely divided. The dynamo driving things tends irresistibly in that direction. Try to split, and it whirls faster.

"Hands up everyone who hates atomization." No, that isn't a question anymore. It would be a call for surrender, if surrender mattered, but it doesn't, as we've seen. Keep on fighting it, by all means. It likes that.

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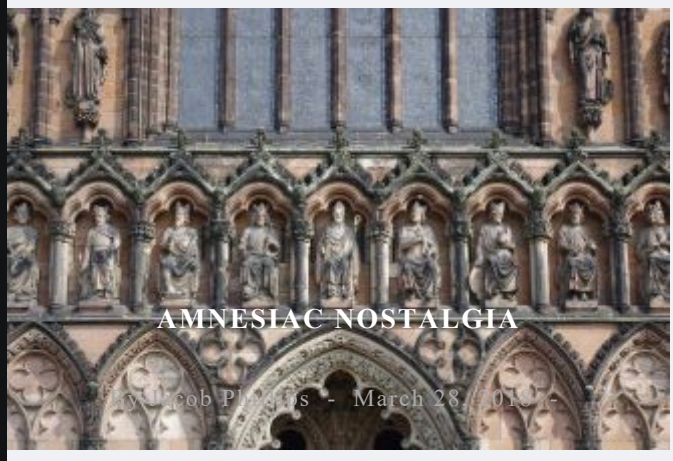

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